

NORTH MCCULLOUGH MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 47,166 acres

North McCullough Mountains Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-050-425) is located in the south central portion of Clark County, Nevada, less than 15 miles south of Las Vegas. The entire WSA is comprised of public land with no private inholdings. The WSA is roughly rectangular in shape, approximately 9 to 10 miles on the north-south axis and 7 to 8 miles on the east-west axis. The eastern boundary is located at the base of an escarpment, slightly west of a large utility corridor. The southeastern boundary is the legal subdivision of lands identified for State selection in the Eldorado Valley Act Lands (EVAL). A drainage immediately to the north of the McCullough Pass utility corridor identifies the southern boundary. Dirt roads, of varying quality, parallel the western boundary in Hidden Valley. The northern boundary is slightly south of the Black Mountain communication site and access road.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

**0 acres recommended for wilderness
47,166 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for the WSA is to release all 47,166 acres for uses other than wilderness because of resource and manageability concerns. The quality of the wilderness values was a key consideration in the recommendation. Although the WSA has wilderness values, these values are not considered to be of a high enough quality, in comparison to similar WSA's in the Las Vegas area, to merit the area's inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation system. This area's potential value is for dispersed recreation use adjacent to a rapidly expanding urban area.

The WSA generally appears natural but there are several signs of man, primarily vehicle trails due to off-highway vehicle (OHV) travel. The majority of the WSA is easily accessible to vehicles from Hidden Valley on the west central portion of the WSA and the Las Vegas valley on the northwest side. Five and one-half miles of unimproved vehicle ways occur in the WSA. Scattered vehicle tracks occur in the western end, near Hidden Valley, and in many of the drainages and low hills into the WSA. One exploratory drill pad is within the WSA. Access to the central portion of the WSA by OHVs is almost unrestricted by natural features.

Solitude opportunities are due to topography, remoteness and lack of human activity and are not due to any intrinsic values unique to the area. A Communication site, utility corridors, active sand and gravel operations, air traffic from McCarran International, and resort and subdivisions proposals on private land nearby, currently affect lands around the WSA.

There are no significant wildlife species or habitats, or scientific and educational values in the area that would benefit from wilderness designation. The WSA does support an undisturbed desert plant community of black grama grass and a cholla forest. There are several cultural features including the Sloan Petroglyphs which is listed on the National Register of Historical Places. These features will receive special protection under existing BLM laws and regulations from any surface disturbing activity.

The WSA has minimal potential for mineral development. However, the edge of the WSA has high favorability for salable quantities of sand and gravel. One sand and gravel operation has been developed in Hidden Valley and continues to provide high quality silica sand. A desire and need has been expressed to expand the operation, possibly into the WSA. Both Hidden Valley and Lava Valley have excellent potential for additional sand and gravel operations. High quality roads would access these operations. Urban expansion demands from the Las Vegas valley will encourage development.

At the present time, there is little threat to the existing naturalness of the area. There are no known or

projected activities, and no valid rights of others in the WSA. The eastern ridgeline is protected due to topography and other physical constraints. Therefore, even without wilderness designation, the quality and level of values now found in the WSA are not expected to significantly change.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The WSA is predominantly natural. It contains the north half of the north-south trending McCullough Range. The massive, rounded to flat-topped volcanic peaks have a steep east-facing escarpment and gradual western slope. Black basalt flows are exposed on the ridges, peaks and western slopes.

The east escarpment consists of formations of reddish-brown andesite breccia. The WSA contains some valley land on the western fringe and a broad two-mile-wide central valley separating the main ridgeline from the rugged Sutor Hills. No springs occur in the WSA. Desert plants of the creosote bush community, including barrel cactus, scattered joshua trees and several species of cholla and prickly pear, dominate.

Unlike the other WSAs in Clark County, the North McCulloughs are volcanic in origin. Examples of lava flows, ash falls and glassy zones are clearly displayed. The andesite flows of the rugged east face form particularly scenic features. The ridgeline offers excellent views of the Eldorado and Jean Dry Lakes, numerous ranges and the Las Vegas Valley. The WSA supports an undisturbed plant community which combines plants of the Mojave and Sonoran Desert regions and the Great Basin. Of particular interest are black grama grass, not known to occur elsewhere in Nevada, and large stands of teddy bear cholla. Bighorn sheep inhabit the WSA in all but the driest months.

Five and one-half miles of way were found in the WSA. Scattered vehicle use occurs in the western end, Hidden Valley, and its tributaries. One abandoned mine, consisting of a shaft and collapsed shack and an old bladed drill pad can also be found. A communication site and active mine are located outside the WSA but near the boundary. Powerlines and substations are within a few miles of the east and south boundaries, and suburban development from Henderson and Las Vegas continue to grow closer.

B. Solitude: This WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. The rugged east face of the escarpment and the Sutor Hills offer outstanding opportunities for solitude because of the excellent topographic screening. Twisting canyons, peaks and pinnacles screen visitors. Rounded peaks of the ridge, a broad central valley, Lava Valley, Hidden Valley and the lower end of its tributaries do not provide adequate screening. There is no vegetative screening in the WSA. There is light, periodic travel both on the boundary roads and interior ways and washes. Boulder City, Henderson and Las Vegas Valley are visible and audible from portions of the WSA on the north, west and east sides. Although, outside the traffic control area (TCA), overflights from McCarran International Airport pass directly over the WSA. However, overflights are infrequent and tend to be localized to the west edge of the WSA and at an altitude of more than 4,000 feet.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Recreation opportunities similar to the other mountain ranges in the region are present in this WSA. Primitive recreation opportunities abound because of the diversity of possible activities; backpacking, rock scrambling, nature study, photography, hunting and horseback riding, and high quality dayhiking. Canyons on the east face and high points of the range provide numerous destinations and challenge levels. The area is easily accessible yearlong to the residents of Southern Nevada.

D. Special Features: Unlike the other WSAs in Clark County, the North McCulloughs are volcanic in origin. Examples of lava flows, ash falls and glassy zones are clearly displayed. Andesite flows of the rugged east face form particularly scenic features. Ridges offer excellent views of the Eldorado and Jean Dry Lakes, numerous ranges and the Las Vegas Valley. The WSA supports an undisturbed plant community which combines plants of the Mojave and Sonoran Desert regions and the Great Basin. Of particular interest are black grama grass, not known to occur elsewhere in Nevada, and large stands of teddy bear cholla. Bighorn

sheep inhabit the WSA in all but the driest months.

Desert tortoise (Gopherus agassizii), listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) as a threatened species on April 2, 1990, has been identified within the WSA in the bajada areas.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The study area is capable of being managed as wilderness but there will be some manageability concerns. There are 150 acres of pre-FLPMA and 500 acres of post-FLPMA mining claims in the WSA. There are no pre-FLPMA oil and gas leases. Approximately 83 percent (39,148) of the WSA is incumbered by 29 leases.

OHV use in Hidden Valley would be impossible to eliminate because of the easy access to Hidden Valley and the flat terrain. Access into Sutor Hills is a concern due to an accessible wash into the area. Five and one-half miles of unimproved vehicle ways occur in the WSA.

The WSA is bordered on the southeast by the EVAL lands. Future development of these lands is of concern.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The WSA has minimal potential for mineral development. However, the edges of the WSA has moderate to high potential for nonmetallic minerals (sand and gravel). There is low potential for energy resources.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 27 written comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. In general, 17 commentors supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA. Ten commentors and one oral testimony supported no wilderness. Most comments which specifically mentioned the North McCullough Mountains WSA and supported wilderness designation, touched on high wilderness values, unspoiled biological and cultural resource values, and wildlife habitat potential. Comments opposing wilderness centered around making the area available for wildlife enhancement projects, lack of significant wilderness characteristics and recreation opportunities, speculative mineral resource potential and potential impacts to energy and mineral exploration and development.

Clark County Department of Comprehensive Planning supported the no wilderness recommendation although it did not directly comment on the North McCullough Mountains WSA.

The Governor of Nevada, as well as the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of State Lands, State Divisions of Minerals, and Department of Wildlife and Agriculture supported the no wilderness recommendation.

The Environmental Protection Agency supported the proposed action and recommended that the final recommendation include a statement that water and air quality will be best protected under wilderness designation.